



# House Committee on Veterans' Affairs

*Chairman Bob Filner*

## MEMORIAL DAY UPDATE

### RECENTLY PASSED LEGISLATION

- ◆ H.R. 612 – *The Returning Servicemember VA Healthcare Insurance Act of 2007.*
- ◆ H.R. 2199 – *The Traumatic Brain Injury Health Enhancement and Long-Term Support Act of 2007.*
- ◆ H.R. 2239 – *The Early Access to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Benefit Act.*
- ◆ H.R. 1585 – *The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008.*
- ◆ H.R. 67 – *The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007.*
- ◆ H.R. 1470 – *The Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act.*
- ◆ H.R. 1660 – *To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a national cemetery for veterans in the southern Colorado region.*
- ◆ H. Res. 413 – *Recognizing the Service of United States Merchant Marine Veterans.*
- ◆ H. Res. 392 – *Urging Americans and People of all Nationalities to Visit the American Cemeteries, Memorial and Markers.*

### VETERAN FUNDING

- ◆ *FY 2007 Joint Funding Resolution* – A \$3.6 billion increase for VA medical care
- ◆ *U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recovery, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act, 2007* – \$1.8 billion for veterans' programs
- ◆ *FY 2008 Budget Resolution* – An increase of \$6.7 billion over FY 2007 and \$3.6 billion over the Administration's request for veterans' programs

### CHAIRMAN'S CORNER



Memorial Day is an occasion to recognize and remember the heroes that have served and died in uniform. Our nation has a proud legacy of appreciation and commitment to the men and women who have worn the uniform in defense of this country, those living and those whose memories are etched into the liberty we enjoy.

Our veterans are heroes. This grateful nation honors the mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, friends and neighbors who have made the ultimate sacrifice. This Memorial Day will take on a more profound and personal significance for many American families this year - those who are mourning the loss of one of their own and those who have loved ones far from home.

We are united in saying that every person that comes back from this war deserves all the love and care and dignity that this nation can bestow. Those who have lost their heroes deserve all the support that this country has promised. We will work boldly and tirelessly to keep these promises to our veterans and their families.





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## **Recently Passed Legislation:**

The Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee, Bob Filner (D-CA), brought a package of bills to the House floor that would expand veterans' health care and benefits. In addition, the committee worked with the Armed Services Committee to draft the yearly authorization bill for the Defense Department which would streamline GI Bill benefits for reserve and active duty programs under the same jurisdiction. The House passed the following bills:

### ***H. R. 612, The Returning Servicemember VA Healthcare Insurance Act of 2007***

The Returning Servicemember VA Healthcare Insurance Act of 2007 extends from two years to five years following discharge or release the eligibility period for veterans who served in combat during or after the Persian Gulf War to receive hospital care, medical services, or nursing home care provided by the Secretary of the VA, notwithstanding a lack of evidence to conclude that their condition is attributable to such service.

### ***H. R. 2199, The Traumatic Brain Injury Health Enhancement and Long-Term Support Act of 2007***

This legislation directs the VA to improve and expand its ability to provide TBI care, services, and research. Over 40 percent of our returning servicemembers are from rural areas, and H.R. 2199 establishes an innovative program to deliver mental health care services to rural veterans and establishes an Advisory Committee to assist the VA in improving care and services for rural veterans.

### ***H. R. 2239, The Early Access to Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Benefit Act***

This legislation extends Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment benefits to members of the U.S. Armed Forces who are determined to have a disability incurred while on active duty of at least 10 percent or more and likely to be discharged from service due to the disability, which will allow veterans to begin their rehabilitation earlier and increase success upon entering the civilian employment market.

### ***H.R. 1585, The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008***

This bill is the first step in updating the GI Bill for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. H.R. 1585 streamlines educational assistance programs for active duty and reserve programs under the same jurisdiction, extend the eligibility period for members of the Select Reserve to receive educational assistance, and improve loan repayment assistance to servicemembers with critical skills who decided to reenlist in our Armed Forces.



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This legislation improves the transition of servicemembers to the VA upon being retired or separated, establish the Department of Defense Medical Support Fund for the support of servicemembers returning to military service or civilian life, and increase the number of resident physicians at VA hospitals.

Furthermore, it directs the VA to conduct a report on disability evaluation systems used by the DoD and VA to improve the consistency of the two disability evaluation systems, and requires the VA Secretary to conduct a study on the average length of time between desired date for which a veteran seeks to schedule an appointment for health care and the date on which an appointment is completed.

***H. R. 67, The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007***

This bill establishes a grant program for the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide to states outreach activities, cooperative relationships and benefit claims developments. In addition, these grants would allow funding for education and training of state and local government employees for accreditation to provide outreach services, and establish local government veteran's service programs.

***H. R. 1470, The Chiropractic Care Available to All Veterans Act***

This legislation requires the VA to expand to at least 75 medical centers by December 31, 2009, and at all medical centers by no later than December 31, 2011.

***H. R. 1660, To direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a national cemetery for veterans in the Southern Colorado region***

This bill directs the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs to establish a national cemetery for veterans in southern Colorado in order to relieve the burden of veterans' families in the region who have to travel long distances to pay respect to their loved ones.

***H. Res. 413, Recognizing the Service of United States Merchant Marine Veterans***

This resolution, passed by the House of Representatives on National Maritime Day, recognizes the heroic and invaluable sacrifices of United States Merchant Marine veterans to our nation's prosperity and safety.

***H. Res. 392, Urging American and people of all Nationalities to Visit the American Cemeteries, Memorials and Markers***

This resolution encourages people to visit overseas cemeteries, memorials and markers overseen by the American Battle Monuments Commission, which is tasked with controlling and constructing cemeteries and memorials to honor American service members killed on foreign soil.





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## **Veterans Funding:**

### *H.J.Res. 20, Further Continuing Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2007*

The Committee on Veterans' Affairs, working with the Budget Committee, Appropriations Committee, and House Democratic Leadership, was instrumental in achieving the largest funding increase ever for veterans' health care and programs. Democrats provided a \$3.6 billion increase over FY 2006 levels for this current fiscal year.

### *H.R. 2209, U.S. Troop Readiness, Veterans' Care, Katrina Recover, and Iraq Accountability Appropriations Act of 2007*

The bill provides \$1.8 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs, including funds for veterans' medical programs. The bill also includes \$2.1 billion for military health care, including resources for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and Traumatic Brain Injury care and research.

### *S.Con.Res 21, Concurrent Resolution on the Budget for Fiscal Year 2008*

The FY 2008 Budget Resolution, which sets broad funding parameters, was approved by the Democratic Congress on May 17<sup>th</sup> – this resolution provides for \$43.1 billion for veterans' programs, \$6.7 billion more than FY 2007 and \$3.6 billion over the President's budget request.

## **Veterans Benefits:**

The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2008 transfers the Reserve education benefit program to the Department of Veterans Affairs so that both the active duty and reserve programs will fall within the same jurisdiction. This change in jurisdiction would allow for increased oversight of education benefits administered to Guard, Reserve and Active Duty components to ensure that our nation's servicemembers are awarded benefits commensurate with their service.

This same bill also improves the transition of servicemembers of our Armed Forces to the VA upon their retirement or separation. Providing a seamless transition between active duty and veterans' status will assist in providing our men and women in uniform are afforded the proper care and benefits they have rightfully earned.



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## **Veterans Outreach:**

Chairman Bob Filner has implemented a series of roundtable discussions to provide interested stakeholders an opportunity to present new and unique ways to resolve the issues faced by our nation's veterans and their dependents. While this does not replace the formal process of testifying before the committee, it does offer experts the opportunity to raise important issues in an informal and educational setting.

Chairman Filner held a symposium on Post Traumatic Stress Disorder -- the first symposium to discuss improved ways to provide mental health services to veterans. This event brought together mental health care providers, medical doctors, researchers and veterans to help identify the specific issues facing our veterans. The symposium, broadcast on C-SPAN, succeeded in covering a number of ideas for improved mental health service delivery and laid the groundwork for bold and bi-partisan legislation.

The next Full Committee Roundtable in the series focused on VA Disability Claims Roundtable. It now takes an average of 177 days for a disabled service member to get a VA claim processed -- nearly double the 89.5 day wait civilians face in a private health insurance system. The roundtable brought together Administration officials, professors, legal experts and veteran service representatives to discuss various ideas to reduce the claims backlog and improve the current process.

The House passed legislation to improve outreach for the development and submittal of claims to the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Veterans Outreach Improvement Act of 2007 would increase coordination of outreach activities within the VA and provide \$25 million annually in 2008, 2009, and 2010 for grants to state and local government for veteran outreach program.